

WASHINGTON -- Both of Nebraska's U.S. senators fired off letters Friday to top military leaders after learning that Offutt Air Force Base scored highest in the evaluation of potential sites for a significant new command that the Air Force wants to send to Louisiana. The Air Force on Thursday announced the selection of Barksdale Air Force Base near Shreveport as the preferred spot for the new Global Strike Command, which will oversee the Air Force's nuclear operations. But Offutt actually earned the highest score among finalists for the command, the Air Force revealed Friday. Sen. Mike Johanns, a Republican, wrote to Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Air Force Secretary Michael Donley asking them to reverse the selection and place the new command at Offutt. Johanns said there is an excellent chance that the "outrageous" decision will be overturned. "If they don't, what they are saying is the scoring was a charade, and I don't think they want to be in that position," he said. Sen. Ben Nelson, a Democrat, sent his own letter to Donley asking for a better explanation of why Offutt was passed over. "I believe the Air Force's decision to discount its own criteria when making the selection undermines the entire process," Nelson wrote, copying the letter to President Barack Obama. Johanns' letter to Donley expressed disappointment that when the two spoke about the decision Thursday, Donley neglected to mention Offutt's top score. "I just don't feel he was candid with me," Johanns said. "He gave me kind of a flowery explanation as to what they were thinking about, but he never got to a point where he said 'Senator, you scored the highest, but you still lose.' And that really, really angers me." Friday's revelations compounded the frustration already felt by those in Omaha and Bellevue who lobbied to bring the command and the accompanying jobs and economic development opportunities to Offutt. Air Force officials briefed congressional aides Friday on the assessment process. According to a printed version of that briefing, the decision to go with Barksdale focused primarily on the base's ability to provide "nuclear mission synergy." That synergy, according to the briefing, is due primarily to Barksdale's proximity to multiple Air Force nuclear organizations that share various responsibilities to conduct strategic deterrence and global strike operations. "Nuclear mission synergy," in fact, was weighted heaviest among the six criteria. So which base scored highest in that category? Offutt, with 32 of 35 possible points. Barksdale received 31 points. The contradiction between Offutt's top scores and Barksdale's selection had many questioning just what happened. "It certainly has the appearance of politics, not on Capitol Hill, but within the Air Force," said Tim Becker, Nelson's chief of staff. Becker said many ideas are floating around. For example, maybe someone was worried that the presence of U.S. Strategic Command at Offutt would overshadow the new command. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., suggested Thursday that Senate politics might have played a role. Terry's comments prompted Nelson to write to Gates on Friday requesting an investigation. "I am greatly concerned by any accusation that DOD chose Barksdale Air Force Base as the location of Global Strike Command based on political considerations, particularly those in the Senate, rather than an objective evaluation of the qualifications of the bases," Nelson wrote. "Such allegations, if left unaddressed, seriously undermine the credibility and integrity of our armed services and the men and women who serve to keep our nation secure." Terry supported Nelson's call for an investigation, saying the selection doesn't smell right. Terry said he has been told political considerations swayed a previous decision involving Offutt and Barksdale, when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., got involved. That dealt with the 8th Air Force, which is based at Barksdale. Terry said a general told him a year or

two ago that "a decision had been made to move the 8th (Air Force) to Offutt so it could be closer to StratCom, but Landrieu ran interference, and she and Harry Reid were able to keep it in Louisiana." Terry said Landrieu was up for re-election at the time. Terry would not name the general. Terry suggested that if some thing like that happened before, it could have happened again. Reid spokesman Stephen Krupin said Friday that Reid certainly did not play the role Terry suggested and seemed baffled at the notion. "It would be highly unlikely, if not impossible, for a senator to be able to control a DOD decision like this," Krupin said. A Landrieu spokesman referred questions to the Air Force. An Air Force spokesman cited the press release stating that the Barksdale selection was "made using a measured and deliberate process to ensure that the final decision is the best possible outcome for national defense."

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